

Syracuse University

SURFACE

Religion

College of Arts and Sciences

Winter 1999

The Displacement of Jewish Identity in Stefan Zweig's "Buchmendel"

Ken Frieden
Syracuse University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/rel>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Frieden, Ken, "The Displacement of Jewish Identity in Stefan Zweig's "Buchmendel"" (1999). *Religion*. 61.
<https://surface.syr.edu/rel/61>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts and Sciences at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religion by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

THE DISPLACEMENT OF JEWISH IDENTITY IN STEFAN ZWEIG'S "BUCHMENDEL"

IN THE STORY "BUCHMENDEL" (1929), Stefan Zweig represents Jewish identity in Vienna as it is displaced, eclipsed, and then destroyed. Yet the narrator, a man of the world much like Zweig himself, does not mourn this process of ethnic effacement. Instead, he bemoans the associated destruction of literary culture at large and seems unconcerned about the implications for Jews in Vienna or elsewhere. Like other residents of Vienna during the First World War, the urbane postwar narrator even shows a measure of unexamined xenophobia, which is surprising in light of the flesh-and-blood author's Jewish ethnicity and cosmopolitanism. Because the Judaic subtext of "Buchmendel" is subordinated to a universal drama, ethnicity is a suppressed theme.

Ambivalence and self-denial characterized Jews in Stefan Zweig's cultural milieu. Born in 1881 to an assimilated Viennese-Jewish family, Zweig became one of the most popular writers in Europe between the world wars, known especially for his biographies published in the 1920s and 1930s. His prose and ideology were late expressions of the Jewish Enlightenment that began in eighteenth-century Berlin; Zweig shared many of the values that led the Jews of Europe toward Westernization and assimilation. He fled from Austria after the rise of Nazi influence in 1934, however, and after several years of wandering, he and his wife committed suicide in Brazil in 1942. The reception of Zweig's work has suffered immensely since the Second World War rendered anachronistic his dream of universal humanity.¹

The story "Buchmendel" anticipates the anti-Semitism that would eventually haunt its creator.² The story is told in the first person by an unnamed narrator whose education and literary activities suggest obvious links to Zweig. The protagonist is a bookseller named Jacob Mendel who is known widely as "Buchmendel," or "book Mendel." Famous for his prodigious memory of bibliographic details, and as a striking emblem of Viennese literary culture, he is admired by patrons of the café he frequents. During and after the First World War, however, he appears out of place and is persecuted by a society that has suddenly become intolerant. The story revolves around the downfall of this remarkable personage, as retold by characters who remember him. Zweig's narrator views Mendel as a relic from the past and, incidentally, from the East. Another intellectual in the story describes Buchmendel as "ein vorweltlicher Bücher-Saurier aussterbender Rasse" ("a primeval book-saurian of a dying

breed [or race]").³ The notion of race is displaced, like almost everything else in this text, to the realm of books.

The narrator provides a congenial frame to the story, at the beginning and end, by means of unhurried descriptions and reflections. His opening scene combines a hint of ominous events to come with an aura of security: "Wieder einmal in Wien und heimkehrend von einem Besuch in den äußern Bezirken, geriet ich unvermutet in einen Regenguß, der mit nasser Peitsche die Menschen hurtig in Haustore und Unterstände jagte, und auch ich selbst suchte schleunig nach einem schützenden Obdach" (61). ["Once again in Vienna, on return from a visit to the outlying regions, I was unexpectedly caught in a downpour that, with its wet scourge, swiftly chased the people into entryways and other shelters, and I myself quickly searched for a protective refuge."] This well-cadenced phrase balances impressions of Viennese *Gemütlichkeit* and duress as it brings together an awareness of nearby shelter and a sense of being whipped and chased. Although "Buchmendel" is a postwar story, its opening sentence evokes a wartime crisis; the German word for "shelters" (*Unterstände*) has military associations. The narrator finds asylum in a café he describes as "altwienerisch bürgerlich und vollgefüllt mit kleinen Leuten" ["bourgeois in the old Viennese style and filled with common people" (61)]. The entire story unfolds inside this café, which turns out to be a refurbished Café Gluck—named after the composer, but suggesting a lost place of joy and good fortune, *Glück*.

Zweig presents Mendel's story through the narrator's memories and in recollections by Frau Sporschil, an elderly cleaning woman at the café. She turns out to be the only person responsible for preserving Mendel's memory. The name "Sporschil" indicates that she is a trace, a *Spur*, as well as a shield. Another intertextual trace is contained in the name Jacob Mendel, and especially in his nickname "Buchmendel." As a book peddler, Mendel has much in common with one of the major figures in Judaic literature, Mendele Moykher Sforim, which means literally "Mendele the Book Peddler." This character made his début in 1864 and underwent a number of metamorphoses in the Yiddish and Hebrew works of S. Y. Abramovitsh (1836–1917).⁴ Zweig's book-peddling Mendel alludes to the Mendele whose presence pervades fiction by Abramovitsh, the so-called grandfather of modern Yiddish literature and also an enthusiast of the Enlightenment decades before Zweig was born. Within their imaginary worlds, Mendele Moykher Sforim and Jacob Mendel are both traditional Jewish men from the Eastern European shtetl; the difference is that the journeyman Mendele in Yiddish and Hebrew literature never abandons the provinces of Eastern Europe. The latter-day tragedy lies in a displacement from origins that leaves Zweig's character, Jacob Mendel, at an untenable distance from his namesake and his culture.

For Zweig's narrator, the central theme of his story is memory. He recalls a twenty-year period (roughly 1905 to 1925) that concludes with his chance

visit to the renovated Café Gluck. The character Mendel, whom he knew before the First World War, interests him precisely because of his preternatural memory for bibliographical information. Yet Mendel's literary learning is confined to titles and publication data; this superficiality suggests the shallowness of his entry into European culture. Whereas his childhood education included traditional Jewish concepts, his secular knowledge lacks true content.

In a postwar era characterized by impersonality, Zweig grants special importance to the psychology of memory, "for memory always binds, and doubly so loving memory" (91). A woman works "mechanically" near the cash register (*Zahlungsautomat*, 61–62) in the degraded new café. Even mental processes seem to have become mechanical when the narrator prods the "apparatus" of his memory (his *Gedächtnisapparat*, 63) much as one shakes a broken machine. When he finally realizes that this is Café Gluck, "Mendel's place," the narrator recalls his hero as a "miracle of memory" (67). At this point he introduces a musical metaphor into the sequence of technological images. During their first encounter in about 1905, the narrator requests information from Mendel, who "immediately played the most wonderful bibliographical restatements of my theme upon the keyboard of his memory" (67). This was before the war gave prominence to machines at the expense of literary, musical, and artistic expression.

A corollary to the narrator's interest in phenomenal memory is the theme of genius in art. Looking back at his student years in turn-of-the-century Vienna, the narrator tells us: "In diesem kleinen galizischen Büchertrödler Jakob Mendel hatte ich zum erstenmal als junger Mensch das große Geheimnis der restlosen Konzentration gesehen, das den Künstler macht wie den Gelehrten, den wahrhaft Weisen wie den vollkommen Irrwitzigen, dieses tragische Glück und Unglück vollkommener Besessenheit" (65). ["In this little Galician book peddler, Jacob Mendel, I first saw as a young man the great mystery of total concentration, which produces both the artist and the scholar, the truly wise and the totally deranged—the tragic happiness and unhappiness of total obsession."] Mendel became a model for the young narrator, who aspired to outstanding literary accomplishments. Yet this ideal image has its negative side, because Mendel attains his "total concentration" by forgetting all else. Thus Mendel is an ambiguous figure. Heroic by virtue of his miraculous preservation of bibliographical details in his memory, at the same time he is pathetic because of his complete separation from the world. At what price does the protagonist attain such extraordinary powers? "He did not live" ("er lebte nicht"), the narrator states simply.

The key to Mendel's accomplishments may be called "cultural transfer," in Yael Feldman's term.⁵ Mendel achieves rare feats of memory by transferring former Eastern European Jewish practices into his new Viennese identity. Traditional Talmudic learning demanded extensive memorization, and

this skill finds its analogue in bibliographic expertise. The detailed description of a displaced shtetl Jew is unique in Zweig's writings; one facet of this portrait is linguistic. At several points the narrator mentions Mendel's "Eastern jargon," a pejorative reference to the Yiddish language, and the story quotes a handful of his Yiddish words—*Parch* (67), *Nu, eppes, Sechel, Amhoréz* (68), *Oi*, and *Oiwel* (73). They are what remains of the former Jacob or "Jainkeff" (81).

Even more exotic, in the eyes of the cosmopolitan narrator, is Mendel's childhood in the East: "Vor dreiunddreißig Jahren, mit noch weichem, schwarzflaumigem Bart und geringelten Stirnlocken, war er, ein kleines schiefes Jüngel, aus dem Osten nach Wien gekommen, um Rabbinat zu studieren; aber bald hatte er den harten Eingott Jehova verlassen, um sich der funkelnden und tausendfältigen Vielgötterei der Bücher zu ergeben" (73). ["Thirty-three years before, as a small slouching boy with a soft, black downy beard and curly forelocks, he had come to Vienna from the East in order to study for the rabbinate; but he had soon left the severe monotheistic God, Yahweh, in order to devote himself to the scintillating and multifaceted polytheism of books."] Alternatively secular and polytheistic book cults have swept aside Mendel's biblical and Talmudic education and, without regrets, the narrator affirms this explicit displacement.⁶ All that remains, marked in the rhythms of Mendel's body, is a habit of rocking back and forth (*schaukeln*), "a habit brought with him from the *cheder*, the Jewish school for small children in the East" (65). The displacement involves a cultural transfer that is epitomized by the narrator's explanation of the word *cheder* and his observation that Mendel "read the way other people pray" (65). We might say, more precisely, that Mendel memorizes title pages as he once memorized pages of the Talmud.

The narrator consistently avoids passing judgment on this phenomenon of displacement. For most of the Jews living in fin-de-siècle Vienna, it was a historical reality that lay in the family history just one or two generations past. So the narrator situates Mendel's tragedy elsewhere, at a safe distance from the situation of Viennese Jewry and of Zweig himself. A single passage intimates that the society around Buchmendel is flawed in its failure to value him:

Eingesetzt in ein Seminar, an eine öffentliche Stelle hätte dies Gehirn tausende, hunderttausende von Studenten und Gelehrte belehrt und erstaunt, fruchtbar für die Wissenschaften, ein unvergleichlicher Gewinn für jene öffentlichen Schatzkammern, die wir Bibliotheken nennen. Aber diese obere Welt war ihm, dem kleinen, ungebildeten galizischen Buchtrödler, der nicht viel mehr als seine Talmudschule bewältigt, für ewig verschlossen; so vermochten diese phantastischen Fähigkeiten sich nur als Geheimwissenschaft auszuwirken an jenem Marmortische des Café Gluck. (70)

Placed in a public post at a university, this mind would have taught and awed thousands or hundreds of thousands of students and scholars—fruitful for the sciences, and an incomparable benefit to those public treasure houses we call libraries. But for this small, untrained Galician book peddler, who had received little more than his Talmudic schooling, this higher world was forever closed; thus his fantastic capabilities could operate only as a secret science at that marble table in the Café Gluck.

Apart from this faint protest against hierarchies in Viennese society, the narrator seems to place the responsibility for Mendel's demise on this man's own one-sidedness and lack of secular education.

The narrator learns of Mendel's downfall from Frau Sporschil, who views his demise as the result of sheer stupidity: "Unser Freund Jakob Mendel hatte wahrhaftig nichts Unrechtes begangen, sondern nur (erst später erfuhr ich alle Einzelheiten) eine rasende, eine rührende, eine selbst in jenen irrwitzigen Zeiten ganz unwahrscheinliche Dummheit, erklärbar nur aus der vollkommenen Versunkenheit, aus der Mondferne seiner einmaligen Erscheinung" (79). ["Our friend Jacob Mendel had, in truth, done nothing wrong, but only. . . acted with an excessive, moving, improbable stupidity, even for those deranged times, explicable only from the total absorption and otherworldliness of his unique case."] This absorption (*Versunkenheit*) in bibliography to the exclusion of all else, in turn, echoes the Jewish penchant for Talmudic study. Mendel "read no newspapers" (75) and is completely ignorant of political events; in this respect he resembles pious Jews who renounce history and cleave instead to sacred texts. A certain ahistoricity characterizes traditional Jewish scholarship; a passage in the Talmud asserts, for example, that "there is no early and no late in Torah" (*eyn mukdam u-m'uchar ba-torah*).

Mendel's error, in ignorance of the ongoing war, is to write letters of inquiry to booksellers in France and England. This innocuous act arouses suspicions of espionage, which in turn lead to Mendel's arrest and incarceration as an unnaturalized Russian citizen. Two years of imprisonment destroy Mendel's mind. The narrator describes this undoing through a combination of artistic and mechanistic images:

in dem phantastischen Kunstbau seines Gedächtnisses mußte irgendein Pfeiler eingestürzt und das ganze Gefüge in Unordnung geraten sein; denn so zart ist ja unser Gehirn, dies aus subtilster Substanz gestaltete Schaltwerk, dies feinmechanische Präzisionsinstrument unseres Wissens zusammengestimmt, daß ein gestautes Aderchen, ein erschütterter Nerv, eine ermüdete Zelle, daß ein solches verschobenes Molekül schon zureicht, um die herrlich umfassendste, die sphärische Harmonie eines Geistes zum Verstummen zu bringen. Und in Mendels Gedächtnis, dieser einzigen Klaviatur des Wissens, stockten bei seiner Rückkunft die Tasten. (86)

in the fantastic, artistic frame of his memory, some pillar must have collapsed and left the entire structure in disorder; for our mind is so delicately tuned—this circuitry of subtlest materials, this fine, mechanical, precision instrument of our knowing—that an obstructed vein, a convulsed nerve, a worn-out cell, or a misplaced molecule suffices, in order to silence even the masterful, most comprehensive, harmony of the spirit. And when he returned [from confinement], in Mendel's memory—this unique keyboard of knowledge—the keys were stuck.

The mixed metaphor, which fuses the realms of architecture, mechanics, biology, and music, indicts technological society and at the same time shows a measure of the narrator's participation in it. The delicate results of cultural transfer have been thrown off course by a single false turn, and "Mendel was no longer Mendel, as the world was no longer the world" (86–87). The narrator's own mechanical metaphors reflect his part in this development, and he remains in control of the story, masterfully weaving together past and present scenes.

If we peel away the shell of universality that surrounds "Buchmendel," we find an implicit, unspoken message of this remarkable story. Language and ethnicity are at the heart of Mendel's collapse, yet on the surface Zweig's narrator remains indifferent to these themes. At stake for the narrator are memory, high art, and European literature. These pinnacles of human accomplishment have been endangered by the First World War: the narrator guides us to interpret his story "Buchmendel" as an allegory of the destruction of literary culture caused by war, or as an allegory of the takeover of the human spirit by technological mastery. This general humanistic message is neither surprising nor threatening. Indeed, when paraphrased so simply, it appears banal.

The text also suggests a more specific commentary on postwar Vienna. Xenophobia during the war may be comprehensible from a military standpoint, but Vienna's subsequent treatment of the ruined Jew is another matter. When Mendel returns from imprisonment, he is further humiliated and persecuted by a new owner of the Café Gluck. The former proprietor, as indicated by his name, Herr Standhartner, "stood hard" to support even an impoverished book peddler like Buchmendel. The clean and efficient atmosphere of the modernized café does not, however, leave room for such an anachronism; Buchmendel without his phenomenal memory is merely a freak, an outlandish *Ausländer* who cannot even pay for his rolls.

Yet the narrator seems to miss the ethnic significance of his tale, presumably because his own situation demands a selective blindness. At the close of the story, the narrator feels ashamed that he had forgotten about the existence of Buchmendel, while an illiterate cleaning lady preserved his memory:

Denn sie, die Unbelehrte, sie hatte wenigstens ein Buch bewahrt, um seiner besser zu gedenken, ich aber, ich hatte jahrelang Buchmendel

vergessen, gerade ich, der ich doch wissen sollte, daß man Bücher nur schafft, um über den eigenen Atem hinaus sich Menschen zu verbinden und sich so zu verteidigen gegen den unerbittlichen Widerpart alles Lebens: Vergänglichkeit und Vergessensein. (92)

For she, the uneducated one, had at least retained a book, the better to remember him; but I had for years forgotten Buchmendel—I, who should have known that one only creates books in order to unite oneself with people beyond the period of one's own breathing days, and so to defend against the inexorable enemy of all that lives: transience and oblivion.

These high-sounding phrases conceal the deeper meaning of what has taken place. The narrator assumes a moralistic tone, preaching about the virtues of human memory and praising books as weapons against oblivion. Taking refuge in this self-chastening remorse, the narrator neglects a fuller questioning of his own story. He reads the writing on the wall but interprets it one-sidedly. The coded message, unconscious perhaps even to the author, is not merely that memory will save us from death. This platitude contrasts with a more pertinent Hebrew expression, "Charity rescues from death" (*tzedakah tatzil mimaver*), which points a different way. Indeed, Mendel's demise shows how fragile human memory can be.

Buchmendel's destruction is the direct outcome of his cultural displacement. Where Talmudic study was, secular learning takes place.⁷ This new obsession abstracts him entirely from the world, unlike traditional Jewish learning that is intimately tied to everyday practices and the concreteness of communal life. The secular mind collapses immediately under the weight of political persecution; the individual is readily forgotten, as the cases of Buchmendel and his creator Stefan Zweig show. A person may easily be destroyed, but a culture leaves direct and indirect traces that are not eradicated by even the most far-reaching genocide.

The unacknowledged tragedy in "Buchmendel" is that the narrator and implied author misconstrue the tragedy and present it as a generic human condition of loss. Both Mendel and the narrator forget the culture from which they come; if we wish to universalize, we might examine more closely the hazards of apparently successful immigration. Even where persecution is slight and assimilation allowed, the concomitant damage to cultural continuity may be irreversible. Perhaps Zweig's suicide in Brazil attests to this, and perhaps—although Zweig glorifies memory in the service of art and fame—the secularization of genius, which suppresses the ethnic and religious past, may be reconceived as a complex strategy of deliberate forgetting and unconscious denial.

This essay is the revised text of a lecture presented on 10 March 1991 at a Columbia University conference entitled "Race and Ethnicity in German and Jewish Thought."

1. Compare Donald G. Daviau, "Stefan Zweig's Victors in Defeat," *Monatshefte* 51 (January 1959): 11.

2. On a similar note, Helmut Rudolf comments, "Die Gestalt Jakob Mendels ist ein Schlüssel zu Stefan Zweig's Gedankenwelt: die Erzählung nimmt tragisch voraus, was sich mehr als ein Jahrzehnt später ereignet: Stefan Zweig's Untergang" ("The figure of Jacob Mendel is a key to the world of Stefan Zweig's thought; the story tragically anticipates what occurs more than a decade later: Stefan Zweig's demise"), in *Német Filológiai Tanulmányok (Arbeiten zur deutschen Philologie)* 1 (1965): 129. See also Ken Frieden, "Stefan Zweig and the Nazis," in *A Jewish Journal at Yale* 1 (1983): 39–41.

3. Stefan Zweig's "Buchmendel," in *Kleine Chronik: Vier Erzählungen* (Leipzig: Insel, 1929) 66. Henceforth cited by page alone; all translations are my own. This powerful story was reprinted in *Kaleidoskop* (Vienna: Herbert Reichner, 1936)—two years before the Nazi annexation of Austria. An old and inadequate English version of "Buchmendel," translated by Cedar Paul, is contained in Stefan Zweig, *Jewish Legends* (New York: Markus Wiener, 1987) 227–263.

4. See Ken Frieden, *Classic Yiddish Fiction: Ahramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1995), chapters 1–3.

5. See Yael S. Feldman, *Modernism and Culture Transfer: Gabriel Preil and the Tradition of Jewish Literary Bilingualism* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College P, 1986).

6. Compare the related discussion by David Turner in "Memory and the Humanitarian Ideal: An Interpretation of Stefan Zweig's *Buchmendel*," *Modern Austrian Literature* 12 (1979): 45–46.

7. This formulation echoes Freud's now famous statement about the psychoanalytic cure: "Where the id was, the ego shall be" ("Wo Es war, soll Ich werden"). A process of making-conscious or rendering accessible to reason characterizes both psychoanalysis and the secularization of the Jews in modern Europe. Skeptically, one might add Karl Kraus's observation that psychoanalysis (or secularization) is the disease for which it purports to be the cure.

WORKS CITED

- Daviau, Donald G. "Stefan Zweig's Victors in Defeat." *Monatshefte* 51 (January 1959): 1–12.
- Feldman, Yael S. *Modernism and Cultural Transfer: Gabriel Preil and the Tradition of Jewish Literary Bilingualism*. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College P, 1986.
- Frieden, Ken. *Classic Yiddish Fiction: Ahramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz*. Albany: State U of New York P, 1995.
- . "Stefan Zweig and the Nazis." In *A Jewish Journal at Yale* 1 (1983): 39–41.
- Rudolf, Helmut. *Német Filológiai Tanulmányok (Arbeiten zur deutschen Philologie)* 1 (1965): 121–130.
- Turner, David. "Memory and the Humanitarian Ideal: An Interpretation of Stefan Zweig's *Buchmendel*." *Modern Austrian Literature* 12 (1979): 43–62.
- Zweig, Stefan. "Buchmendel." In *Kleine Chronik: Vier Erzählungen*. Leipzig: Insel, 1929. 61–92.
- . "Buchmendel." In *Kaleidoskop*. Vienna: Herbert Reichner, 1936. 97–124.
- . "Buchmendel." Trans. Cedar Paul. In Stefan Zweig, *Jewish Legends*. New York: Markus Wiener, 1987. 227–263.